

Catch Me If You Can

by A Lovely Treason

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Summary: Dragon training isn't what it used to be. Can the gang keep it together when they're expected to lead recruits through a game of capture the flag? H/A Birthday present to Sandfire Kat Rated T for safety. One-shot.

Catch Me If You Can

****Happy birthday (*cough* yesterday *cough*) Sandfire Kat!

****Disclaimer: I don't own How to Train Your Dragon or any of the canon characters below. I don't own the Internet either, but I'm using that too.****

Half-light crept its way into the loft, driving away any chance I had of sleeping in. I groaned, remembering only at the last minute that I shouldn't have moved. Trying hard to lie still, I waited with my eyes shut tight, hoping against hope that my morning wouldn't start out like they usually did.

No such luck.

The scampering of paws at the steps of the loft ladder told me as much. I waited, casting a sidelong glance at the bunk next to mine. Grae took one look at me and grinned; her favorite part of the day, no doubt.

I rolled my eyes and tried to hide my grin as I braced myself for the two brutish hounds to come crashing up onto the loft and terrorize our blankets. I didn't have to wait long.

Two furry heads came poking into the burrow I'd made under my blankets and snuffled my hair into a wet mess, then began fighting each other for the first scratch behind the ears.

This time, though, I'd gotten smart. I pulled a tightly-bound leather pouch from beneath my bed and loosened the cord, throwing the small bundle to the floor below our loft. The dogs' heads flew up, taking my blanket with them as they tore down the stairs again to find their treat.

"Riot! Noaa!" My cousin sat up straight, face fallen when she realized she wouldn't be getting a wake-up lick. "What did you do to them?"

I laughed, swinging my legs over the side of the bed and stretching. "Snotlout's going to be missing his socksâ€¦"

Grae shot me a slight glare before remembering something. Her face took on a whole new light and she beamed some of that mischievous energy at me. "It's the first day of summer."

"Yeah, so?" There was still a chance she'd forgottenâ€¦

"It's yourâ€¦" Her eyes went wide as I flew across the few feet between us and clamped a hand over her mouth. She laughed anyway and tried to lick my fingers. Eleven-year-oldsâ€¦

"One more word about that," I paused, trying to think of a suitable threat. "And you'll be on your own today."

Her face paled a little and I got up off my knees, reaching over my bunk for the clean burgundy shirt I'd hung to dry from the rafters. I turned away and pulled my nightshirt off, dressing quickly in the slight cold. Grae did the same, tugging on a faded green tunic with slightly shaking hands. I felt a little guilty for reminding her of the training. Just as I was about to apologize and give her a little confidence-boost, a voice called up from the kitchen.

"WHAT in Valhalla is THIS?"

* * *

><p>Half an hour later found me binding my arms with surprising vigor. I felt tired out of my mind, but the thought of the coming session was enough to keep me alert and a little thrilled.<p>

Riot and Noaa weaved around my legs as I got up to get my bag, nearly tumbling me to the ground after a particularly bad turn. "Noaa! So help meâ€¦"

He just stared up at me, wagging his tail in that annoyingly confident way of his. I was losing my touch, clearly. I knelt to scratch them both under their chins, accepting the wave of lapping my face got in return. "Great, I'm going soft."

"I'll be sure to tell Hiccup."

I turned on one knee, looking up to see my aunt smirking at me, one huge bundle tucked under her arm and a child at her hip.

She gave me a wry grin in spite of whatever my face was doing (glare, blush, they're all starting to feel the same). "Care to give me a hand?"

"I hope you mean with the laundry." I got up, poking the little boy in the stomach and flashing him a smile. "I know exactly what you had for supper last night and I, in no way, want to see it again." He giggled and pushed at his mother to let him down to run.

"Not a chance, Roan. You're due for a nap soon." She turned to glance at me as I checked my bindings again. "Don't worry, no babysitting. But when are you allowed off tonight?"

I tried not to lie to her, but felt it would go a little more smoothly with a half-truth. "Probably not until dark."

Aunt Nora pursed her lips, hiking Roan up a little further on her hip. "Stretching yourself a bit thin, don't you think?"

"I'll be fine," I replied, feeling the sudden need to get out of there. "The elder needs someone."

"Yes, but today of all days? And training?"

"I'll tell you all about it when I get back later. See you." I took an apple and a crust from the table and gathered my bag, hurrying out the door before I could get a response.

"Astrid!"

"See you!" I repeated, hoping it would sink in.

* * *

><p>"ALRIGHT, YOU PATHETIC BUNCH OF WALLOWING CUTTLEFISH!"<p>

Gobber was in fine form today.

I glanced around the group of new recruits, seeing Grae hanging near the back and watching her carefully.

"At least he's getting more descriptive." Hiccup came up alongside me, folding his arms and shaking his head with a sad smile at Gobber. I stifled a laugh and grimaced.

"Where are the others? So far I've only seen Snotlout wandering around. Putting the Fear of Thor into the kids, or whatever he called it."

"No clue. I thought Fishlegs would be here early. You know, geek out over stats and all." Hiccup turned, craning his neck to get a good look at the crowd, also giving me a good look at a certain purple bruise spanning the length of his neck.

"What is THAT?" I yelled a little louder than I meant to, taking hold of his shoulders from behind to prevent escape. I peered a little closer than would probably be socially acceptable, but who really cares when a friend's even skin tone is at stake?

"Er, nothing. Probably just a rash."

"Well, Hiccup, nothing is starting to look like a lobster from this angle." I had to resist the urge to poke it.

He broke from my grip and gave me That Look. The one that says I really have no right to his personal life anymore.

"Hiccup, we're friends. And you do dangerously stupid things sometimes. I'm only looking out for you," I placated. Then I went in for the kill. "It was Ruffnut, wasn't it?"

He burst out laughing. "Good one. At least you didn't say Tuffnut."

"I'm not here to judge." Lies.

He laughed again. "Lies."

Eerie.

To play it safe, I punched him (well below the neck, thank you) as a usual hostile prelude before showing a bit of emotion.

"I just worry about you sometimes. Toothless can't always be there to make sure you don't get yourself killed." I bumped him in the shoulder again, smiling.

"Yeah, I know. I just had a little mishap at the weapons stall. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Just then, Snotlout came sidling up to us.

"Those little twâ€"ehâ€"|" And then catching my glare, amended, "_ones_, are going to be so freaked out!" He practically danced with glee. "When do we get out there?"

"Soon," I told him, smiling a little despite myself. "We just have to run through the basics of hunting while mounted, and some safety stuff."

"Excellent," he responded, rubbing his hands together. "Just wait until the demonstrations. They'll be falling off their seats."

"Are there seats now?" Hiccup chimed in. I eyed his bruise.

Snotlout didn't seem to notice the sarcasm, carrying on without missing a beat. "Well, they would if they had any."

Then he surprised me. "Hiccup, you're team captain, right?"

"Wh-what?" Hiccup spluttered, getting a bit of a panicked look in his eye.

"Yeah, we were going to split up into two groups for the hands-on session. Capture the flag, right?" he asked, looking to me for confirmation. I nodded.

"Wellâ€" Iâ€"|"

"Yes, he's team captain," I jumped in. "Are you?"

"Only if you're on my team," Snotlout countered, waggling his eyebrows disturbingly.

"Not gonna happen."

"What, Snotlout ask you out again?" A new voice joined the group. Ruffnut.

"Statistically speaking, it's more than likely. And based on that last comment and the amount of time she spends with Hiccup, I'd say it's highly probable she shot him down." Another new addition: Fishlegs.

"With vigor," Ruffnut supplied.

"Nobody asked you," Snotlout grumbled, giving Fishlegs a punch in the arm for good measure.

I rolled my eyes and heaved a sigh, wondering when the last of the group would arrive to deride my love life (probably in detail, if he could manage).

"Hey, were's Tuffnut?" Hiccup asked Ruffnut. Again, eerie.

"Dunno." She shifted to scan the crowd while Gobber whipped the recruits into a slightly terrified frenzy. "He mentioned something about 'legendary,' but that's when I stopped listening."

And at that moment, a foggy haze descended into the arena, clouding the visible sky and making a few of the weaker stomachs in the crowd heave. Cries of "what's that _smell_?" and "urghf!" spread through the arena before they had their answer come snaking its way through the overhanging chains.

"Did someone say LEGENDARY?"

* * *

><p>By the time the zippleback gas had cleared, the ground had been, well, sanitized, and the sense had been beaten out of Tuffnut, word had spread that we'd be taking teams out to test their value as hunters alongside dragons.

As in the past three years, each new student would have the opportunity to ride through the forest on dragonback with their choice of a set of arrows or sword. Since they would be hunting each other in this hunting exercise, the weapons were rendered "safe" by Gobber's standards, and then rendered safe in the real sense of the word. Arrows would be tipped with harmlessly soft leather studs and swords would be made of wood. Blunt wood, by the way.

Each weapon would be covered in a paint that could easily transfer through contact, and the color would correspond to whatever team to which the wielder belonged. Hiccup's team was blue, Snotlout's red.

Amazingly, the demonstrations went without incident. Hiccup, Snotlout and the twins showed the recruits the proper way to harness and mount the various types of dragons, then Hiccup handed out leather pouches of dragon snuff, ground from a certain heather found near the outskirts of Raven Point. I explained the proper way to set a broken bone, bind a sprain, tie a sling, and create a tourniquet. Fishlegs

finished with an overview of the firepower each dragon possessed and how to coax or repress a dragon's "flame instinct."

We ended up with a dazed but excited crew, splitting the group of about twenty in half, then dividing among ourselves. Ruffnut and I joined Hiccup's team for a slightly unfair advantage, though the other side had the same mentality.

I knelt to pick up my bag of equipment and help Hiccup do the same while Ruff took care of the trash talk.

"Do you hear that?" She demanded of her twin.

"What, that ringing?" His ears were still quite red from the cuffing he'd gotten.

"No, idiot! It's the sound of your defeat!"

Things quickly escalated into a scuffle between the two. Hiccup and I shared a glance and laughed as Ruffnut basically rode her brother's back out of the arena. It was good to be the best.

Snotlout and Fishlegs helped us lead each of our dragons used in the demonstrations out toward the forest perimeter. Then came the trash talk. Again.

"Later losers. Try not to stare at victory as it leaves your presence." Snotlout rubbed his nails on his vest after a second of admiration.

"Just let us know when it gets here," Hiccup quipped with a wry grin. Snotlout chuckled as if speaking to a slow toddler.

"You just keep that chin up," he advised. "It'll make an easier target for my sword."

I snorted.

"What's that, Scofferson? Having second thoughts?"

I laughed again, smoothly stepping forward and running a hand up Snotlout's chest and pretending to consider its broadness until I heard the clank of his wooden sword hitting the rocks. I stepped back, raising an eyebrow.

"Not really."

Where Snotlout's face was a mixture of confusion, cockiness, and a subtle hue of red, I couldn't quite read Hiccup. He seemed a little put off, but confident all the same. It was just a joke. Of course he knew that. And so what if he didn't? The decision to stay friends had been mutual, hadn't it? We hadn't been an item in two years. Now wasn't the time to be developing bad blood between us. I decided to shake it off and focus on the hike to our team's base. If Hiccup wanted something, he could figure out how to get it himself. I wasn't about to force this relationship again.

* * *

><p>"Guys! Come on! What have you been doing out there? The

teams are turning rabid!" We staggered into the steep incline of the alcove in which our base was centered. Chants could be heard emanating from somewhere off to the right.

"_Red hot pain, say that name!_"

We're gonna drive you all insane!"_

Our team's volley wasn't much better.

"_We're like ice, you'll get burned!_"

Watch your back when it's our turn!"_

"Ruffnut!" I exclaimed. "How could you let them _rhyme_"?"

"Aw, lighten up! I thought it was kinda fun." Yep. She'd started it.

Hiccup chuckled as he headed toward the crest of the small cluster of boulders that made up our base. Toothless was lying on it, apparently watching the blue team recruits with amusement in his eyes. In between bouts of chanting, the bolder recruits tried to approach Toothless, who had our flag hanging from his tail fin, tantalizingly out of reach.

Hiccup scratched the dragon's head and got him to lower the tail fin within reach. He caught up the flag and waved it to the assembled group before him.

"Okay, everyone knows the rules of the game, right?" He received a few weak nods, and so continued. "Each team stows the flag somewhere on their base, then leaves a guard while they hunt down the other team's base. First to capture the other team's flag wins. Those who are hit with swords or arrows and get paint on them are at the mercy of the other team. If the paint appears on a vital organ, you're dead. That means going back to your base to clean off before you can go back into the open zones."

"Define _vital _organ!" Crowed a voice from the trees to the left. It sounded suspiciously like Tuffnut. Our team immediately drew up their colored weapons with shouts of "Spy!" and, sadly, "Die!" What a team.

Hiccup calmed them down while simultaneously motioning to Ruffnut to "take care of the problem." A swift tackle and several cries of pain were all that could be heard while the group listened to Hiccup elaborate on the rules. The game would only begin once Gobber blew the official conch shell. A chorus of "ooohs" spread through the group. Mystified.

Inexplicably, Gobber meandered through the trees at this exact moment. The poor recruits did a double take as they watched him materialize from a mist of what smelled strongly of zippleback gas.

"I came to find the owner of _this_, " he explained, gesturing to all of the zippleback.

Then he spotted the twins scuffling in the distance. More cries of

pain. Gobber waved his hand dismissively in their general direction and sighed dramatically, muttering something about being paid enough.

I walked over to lean against Toothless, who eyed the zippleback warily. Gobber hobbled away, leaving the dragon to wait for its owners. They could figure out how to divide a dragon evenly between two teams, no problem.

Hiccup had been staring dryly at the scene unfolding before him. He shook his head while helping me hand out the weapons. We had quite a few eager swordsmen and the rest chose archery. I helped a few in testing their aim while Hiccup planted the flag back on the topmost boulder and turned to help his share of recruits with swordplay.

A few minutes later, the conch sounded and we were off. Assuming Ruffnut had gone rogue, we assigned the sturdiest-looking recruit to guard the flag with his life, then led the first wave of seekers. From there, the recruits divided into subgroups and split their forces to find the red flag.

* * *

><p>Somewhere in the chaos of hunting, it began to rain in large torrents. Afraid of hail, my division took shelter under an overhanging rock on the steep side of the mountain. We moved cautiously from large tree to large tree, hoping members of the red team (or their flag) would surface soon.<p>

Our boots and pants soon had a generous helping of mud coating them. We slogged our way to another alcove before noticing a group of something-possibly-alive sitting in some nearby bushes. I motioned to my team to follow quietly with weapons drawn, then sprang on the bushes. My death cry choked off in my throat as I realized it was the second division of the blue team, plus Ruff and Hiccup. The former group sufficiently coated, the latter two were doing something _very strange_. They were rubbing mud all over each other.

I might have screeched (Yes. Screeched.) something along the lines of "What in Oden's nameâ€" if Hiccup hadn't effectively cut me off by tugging me to the ground and smearing mud on my face.

I might have punched him if Ruffnut hadn't grabbed my hands to smear mud all over my arms as well. The recruits caught on faster, kneeling down in front of the muddled group to follow suit.

Hiccup was grinning and I was glaring, but only a little. He did look pretty ridiculous with mud all over his face and only a white smile for a stark contrast. I began to smile, too, until he started slopping the stuff on my hair. Luckily, Ruff still had my arms.

Soon we were roughly the color of our surroundings and various members of our ranks had random tree branches sticking from their hair and limbs. If all else failed, we could force our enemies into revealing their locations through uncontrollable laughter.

Unfortunately, Hiccup may have become more of a dead giveaway in the rain. His prosthetic began squeaking madly in the wet conditions, forcing me to turn and death-glare him. He gave me a guilty shrug and

I grabbed his arm to drape over my shoulders and alleviate the pressure on the prosthetic. Cue mud steaming off my face from the blush.

I tried to ignore the pokes in my back from a certain soon-to-be-dead friend. She could be taken care of later, when attack wouldn't risk dislocating Hiccup's shoulder. I settled for a few backward swipes with my boot before nocking an arrow meaningfully. Maybe I wasn't so above friendly fire after all.

Ruffnut caught my meaning and sashayed to the front of the group as if to tempt me. I grinned and just about loosed the arrow when I heard a snap to my right. Hiccup was on that side and couldn't be moved quickly enough for me to aim properly. My arrow flew in the wrong direction, thunking against a tree with decided finality. At least vegetation would live in fear of me.

The tree, which was apparently out of the game now, did nothing to shield us from sudden attack. Four members of the red team surrounded us, holding their arrows and swords to within inches of our necks before I could even nock a second arrow. _Hiccup_.

* * *

><p>Sitting in the red team's makeshift prison wasn't so bad. At least it was warm. The bars were comprised of nightmare claws. How Snotlout had gotten Fireworm to sit so still was beyond me.<p>

She held us each in separate cages, nostrils steaming ominously every time one of us so much as glanced toward one of her claws. I settled back against my scaly cage, resigning Hiccup to a slow death when he suddenly began taking off his vest and tunic.

Before I could decide whether or not to call attention to his sudden inclination toward shirtlessness, he'd tossed a gleaming black mass toward me. Fireworm, catching sight of the new addition to my cage, reared back enough for me to worm my way out of her grasp. Taking advantage of her distraction, Hiccup also set the makeshift bars apart enough to escape. We ran and hid behind a small cluster of trees several yards away to allow Hiccup to throw his shirt on again.

"What was _that_ about?"

"I think she thought it was a night fury. Y'know, instinct and all."

"Why were you running around with night fury scales on?" I asked, rubbing a thumb over the smooth sheets of hard black scales.

"Well, it wasn't supposed to happen like this, but I thought it was worth a shot, and kind of dramatic. Who gets presents in dragon prison?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why do I need a present in dragon prison?"

"Because I know your secret," he confided in a conspiratorial whisper.

"My secrâ€"

He suddenly grabbed my arm, turning me to the side to eye a muddied red flag wafting in the breeze a few yards off. An unguarded muddied red flag. I turned to Hiccup and smiled.

* * *

><p>Running through the trees in dragon scale armor is possibly the most heroic-looking thing you could do. Clutching a dirty red flag to your nearly-bare stomach is a little less so. The armor was made to cover my shoulders, chest and upper back, but my stomach was left vulnerable by the night fury-scale-plated protection.<p>

My discarded burgundy shirt had been left as a sad decoy for the red team, which they'd no doubt find out after their guard got back from investigating Fireworm's sudden scare. With the wind whipping my mud-streaked hair and the rain washing my face clean, I laughed as I ran for what felt like my lifeâ€"one hand holding the flag in place over my abdomen, and the other holding the hand that made the whole adventure possible.

A/N: Gah! I did it! Mah first fan fic ever. Please be merciful, guys. It was rough. Still is, now that I look at it...

Anyway, this is dedicated to Sandfire Kat, who was born yesterday (happy birthday, girlie!) and deserves a medal for all the putting-up-with she did while I delayed posting a story for about half a year.

Now, this must be the part where I beg for reviews. Please, please review. I need to know how I did and where to improve. I'm pretty sure my version of Astrid is much too snarky, but I couldn't help mahself. Let me know if you agree/disagree.

End
file.